

# THE Musher Monster





## In pursuit of the toughest sled dog race on the planet

BY MASA TAKEI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD HARTMIER

In Peter Freuchen's account of his 1924 journey across Canada's far north, the Danish explorer recounts how, in a driving storm, his sled dogs refused to travel any farther. So Freuchen takes refuge under his dogsled, overturned against the wind-side of a large boulder, but when he awakes finds himself entombed, his feet painfully frozen. Barely able to move, he claws at the hardened snow. Finally he resorts to using the edge of a polar bear hide – stiffened with frozen saliva – as a chisel. He knows one foot has already succumbed to frostbite. Unless he frees himself soon, an icy crypt will be his final resting place.

Almost a century later, I punch out of my down sleeping bag, gasping in the Yukon's frigid February night air. On the tarp next to me, two Muktuk Adventure guides remain peacefully encased in their sleeping bags, a light dusting of frost coating their cocoons and only a fist-size breathing hole open above their noses. The moonlight is so bright I can make out the 35 sled dogs curled up in nearby flakes of hay. Several metres beyond: two canvas wall tents with wood-burning stoves shelter the rest of our party of nine.

**AT THE STARTING CHUTE of the 1,635-km Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race, which each February sees a maximum of 50 mushers and their teams of sled dogs (bred from those that survived and thrived during the Klondike Gold Rush era) competing for a first-place purse of \$35,000.**

Everything is frozen in silence, though just 1,300 kilometres up the trail, the front-runner of the 24th annual Yukon Quest 1,000 Mile International Sled Dog Race is within a half-day's hard travel from setting a new course record. We dogsledding tenderfoots, on the other hand, are days away from an entirely different kind of record.

It is the early hours of Day 3 of this six-day sledding expedition, which includes a 135-km stretch of the Yukon Quest Trail. Our group, a loose collection of cryophiles from three continents, has signed on with Muktuk's Quest adventure option for an inside look at the first leg of the race in progress, followed by several days of mushing in the racers' wake. Our mission: to dogsled a 267-km loop along the Yukon's historic Overland Trail, north to the first Quest checkpoint at Braeburn, then south along Lake Laberge and back to Muktuk owner and Quest racer Frank Turner's guest ranch on the Takhini River outside Whitehorse. But at the speed we're going, a pace comparable to that of a tricycle trailing the Tour de France, the guides have already advised we're possibly the slowest mushers in the kennel's 15-year history. By the end of Day 6, they joke, we'll be lucky to have made Braeburn Lodge, the biker-run roadhouse famous for its oversized cinnamon buns.

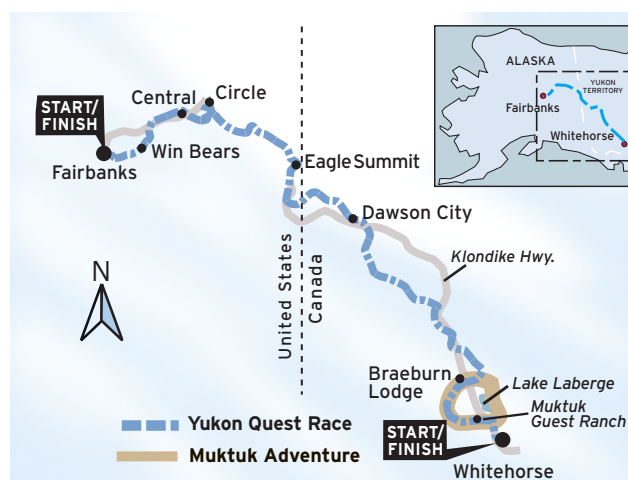
The rough-and-tumble cousin of the better-known Iditarod, the 1,635-km Quest is billed as the toughest sled dog race on the planet. Back in 1983, its creators schemed

over drinks in Fairbanks' Bull's Eye Saloon to forge a route that would reflect the original vision of the Iditarod – *before* all the media and commercial interests its now-celebrated status entails. Alternating direction each year between Fairbanks, Alaska, and Whitehorse, the Yukon, this means the Quest is about as long as the 1,868-km Iditarod but with less than half as many checkpoints. (Translation: long stretches of isolated mushing.) Racers must also traverse four mountain ranges with heavier sleds, fewer dogs and no substitutions, and without the assistance of non-racers, except at the halfway mark in Dawson City. As well, the race is held in colder weather (temperatures this February have dropped below -50°C), with endurance and self-sufficiency prized over pure speed. Still,

champion with the same first name from the cycling world. Since coming back from his own bout with cancer five years ago, Mackey has won the Quest for the past two years. If he wins again this February, he'll be only the second musher ever to win three consecutive Quests. (The first, Hans Gatt, an amicable Austrian from Atlin, B.C., has come second to Mackey these past two years.) William Kleedechn, 47, an AC/DC-loving hard man, originally from Germany, is another strong competitor. Despite having a prosthetic leg, "Iron Bill" has placed amongst the top five finishers every year since 2001, with the exception of 2004, when he withdrew after breaking his leg. But it's not just men who are favoured to win. Michelle Phillips is perhaps the strongest female competitor in

lights as each caravan pulled up – panting and steaming like the Trans-Siberian coming into a station – before waiting officials. Rimed with ice and snow, along with every sled and its bleary-eyed driver, the dogs still had the energy to announce their arrival with a cacophony of barks and yelps before pirouetting onto straw beds.

But the most enduring glimpse of the race came on its fourth day when, in the dark hours linking night to morning, we pulled the truck over at a rare section of the route that shadows the highway. The wilderness diorama was frozen in absolute stillness, the only sound the *huh, huh* panting of dogs and the swishing of a single set of sled runners over crisp snow. Overhead, the northern lights cut a green swath across the night



at their essence, both races remain a celebration of the primal partnership between humans and dogs that made early survival in the North possible.

Ten days ago, our group joined the crowd of hardy spectators at the Whitehorse starting chute to cheer on the race's 28 competitors, including Frank Turner, as they set off on their epic run. If anyone is the godfather of the Quest it is the bearded, bespectacled and deceptively diminutive 59-year-old, entered this year with 14 of his top dogs. Blessed with the energy of someone half his age, the 1995 Quest champion has competed every year since the race started in 1984, except in 2006, when his then-26-year-old son signed up. Now the former Toronto social worker is back from a very short retirement to do battle once more and perhaps better his course record, which has stood since he set it a decade ago.

Other favourites: Lance Mackey, a 36-year-old Alaskan often compared to that

the field, a Tagish, Yukon, native who is supported this year by her husband, Ed Hopkins, another long-time Quest racer.

As the black-and-white bib of the last musher disappeared down the ceremonial starting chute, our group took to the highway. We would journey by truck to successive checkpoints, following the racers' progress and counting the days to our own backcountry adventure. Carmacks, population 426, several hundred kilometres along the course and the second checkpoint, marked the next time we would see Turner, a day and a half into the race. The town's community centre looked like the rallying point for earthquake survivors, with computers and communication centres set up on folding tables and spectators and support staff sleeping on the gymnasium floor. A white board tracked which mushers were in, as handlers and media rushed to meet incoming teams. Out in the darkness, 14 sets of eyes reflected the blinding blur of camera

sky as the lone musher raised a fur-mittened hand in silent greeting and veered back into the woods. Piling back into the truck, we continued on in subdued silence.

By the time we rolled into Dawson City, the mushers' last stop before the Alaska border, it was Day 5 of the race and several teams had scratched or withdrawn, including Turner's. Hard-packed snow makes for fast running but also more wrist and shoulder strains amongst the dogs. Turner had already dropped two, and his lead, Carter, had begun showing signs of serious tendon injury. An unfortunate turn of events, but it meant the Quest legend would now be on hand to impart a few last pointers before seeing us off on our own sledding epic, just as we'd seen him off a week earlier.

The Quest's leading mushers were some 1,200 km into the race the next morning when we pulled into Mukluk Adventures' command central. An off-the-grid outpost built with massive Sitka timbers shipped



from Haines, Alaska, the main lodge sits a kilometre in from the highway on 41 hectares, along with five cabins and 108 dogs. Doddering old-timer huskies who have paid their race dues are free to wander and doze; the rest are kept tethered to their respective kennels. As we unhitched a few for a practice run, the sight of dogs freed from their perches brought on a bout of baying reminiscent of hounds on the hunt after a prison break.

By the time we set off at 5 a.m. the next day, we were trammelling eight days behind the world's mushing elite. We focused on smoothing out the kinks: learning to set up, break camp, care for the dogs, care for ourselves. The Takhini River lay wide open before us, like a highway – broad, blue sky overhead. Then we turned into the forest

and onto the Overland Trail, to camp on our second night at the old site of the Little River Roadhouse. The clearing seemed like a good spot to catch sight of the northern lights; I opted to sleep out with the guides, *al fresco*.

**After falling back** asleep the next morning, I awake to hysterical laughter. Cynthia, our pretty young guide from Victoriaville, Quebec, is doubled over, gasping for breath. The zipper on fellow guide Travis's sleeping bag is frozen shut. But instead of helping, she is having a giggling fit as he struggles to melt the iced-up zipper with his bare thumb and forefinger, the only parts of him visible.

This time last year, Travis was guiding 12,000 km away in Tasmania, Australia, in temperatures 80 degrees hotter. Even in the early morning hours it was near impossible to walk on exposed rock in bare feet; a Therm-a-Rest sleeping pad would delaminate in the extreme heat and balloon into a cylindrical sausage. For similar reasons, we aren't using Therm-a-Rests here, either. In inflating them our breath would freeze the layers

together. I've already made a similar mistake with the lens on my camera, now frosted over; though no matter, the batteries are dead. Turner had warned us to keep them, and our toothpaste, next to our bodies, and I've followed the latter part of his advice (guarding my contact solution as well). Still, no matter how long I keep a bar of dark chocolate snug in my inner pocket, it retains the consistency of candle wax.

Celsius or Fahrenheit, -40 is cold. Certainly, like the locals, none of us feel the need to include wind chill to hype the reality; instead we note how at -45°C the properties of things change. Metal becomes sticky. Plastic becomes brittle. Humans succumb to inertia. But as Turner advised us earlier, the cold can be a motivator during days out racing. Sleeping in his emptied sled, he makes sure not to get too comfortable so that he wakes shaking. Too cold to stay in his bag, he then rallies and heads back out. Mushers typically race for four to six hours at a stretch before letting their dogs rest for the same amount of time. But once a team is fed and bedded down, only a few hours remain for the musher to sleep before it's time to pack up and get the dogs back on the gangline.

We, on the other hand, journey at an altogether different pace. The first order of business each morning is to get the fire started. Anyone who has read Jack London's *To Build a Fire* has some appreciation of the urgency this art can have in the north.



**A 15,000-YEAR HERITAGE** (clockwise from opposite, far left) Booties protect against paw injury and ice buildup in -50°C temperatures; multiple Quest champion Lance Mackey; "husky hotel" at mandatory 36-hour layover in Dawson City, where the first racer into town wins four ounces of placer gold. (page 32) Racers' dogs *always* come first.



weight), so we melt snow for coffee and the moistening of frozen dog kibble. Meanwhile they have no problem devouring the frozen turkey skins we throw them, hard as hockey pucks – a trick the mushers themselves sometimes try to emulate. Turner, for one, has lost three teeth over the years while racing, mostly due to the frozen granola bars that can make up the bulk of a racer's trail diet.

snow, wrestling to get booties, harnesses and coats on the dogs and rub arnica oil on sore paws ("No feet, no dogs," is the musher's aphorism). Swaddled in balaclavas, insulated bib pants and down parkas over multiple layers, we move as if we have no necks. But from the way he's hunched over, I can tell that Art's back is bothering him. The six-foot-five retired Boeing engineer will later clip his head on a low branch, and his dogs will run back into camp without him. But he's no rookie, having dogsledded in Sweden and Alaska and climbed some of the taller mountains in North America. On this outing, he has bonded with a fellow Shitsu owner, Elmer, a retired electrical engineer from Farmville, Virginia. Big, bushy white beard, a southern drawl (particularly when playing Waylon Jennings on his guitar), Elmer comes across a bit like Uncle Jesse from the Dukes of Hazzard, but that could just be the beard. Further down the line are Bettina, a bespectacled chemist from Brehnen, Germany, and Jen, a twice-widowed grandmother of seven from Sydney, Australia, who has never been in snow before. Her last vacation was spent whitewater rafting on the Zambezi River.

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**Our time spent** on our knees, wrestling with our furry colleagues, is consistent with what Turner and the guides have drilled into us: mushing is a team sport. The dogsledder is merely the enabler for a team of elite endurance athletes, each with its own personality and position in the pack. Racing dogs are capable of running 160 km in a day while pulling a 100-kilogram sled and a driver – then doing it again the next day and the next, and so on. The average household pet has as much in common with these dogs as a Ford Pinto has with a Ferrari. To earn the privilege of running with such champions, we're expected to fulfill our end of the deal.

Swooping down a section of winding single track through aspen, I discover this means more than just slipping on the right booties and throwing down some kibble. Besides steering the sled wide of trees, leaning and shifting one's body weight between the runners, a driver ensures that lines are appropriately tight – slowing the sled down either by standing on a patch of snowmobile tread hanging off the back or standing on a clawed brake bar so that it bites into the snow. And on the uphill, mushers get off the runners and push. Fail to do so quickly

enough and team members look back over their shoulders, an ear or two flopped over, eyes looking askance.

So, I run and push. Despite the sub-arctic temperatures, I'm sweating in my wool long-underwear. I drop the coyote-fur-ruffed hood on my Canada Goose parka, though the neoprene facemask stays on, since I already feel windburned on one cheekbone. Topping another rise, I jump back onto the runners in what I hope is a fluid motion, but judging from the looks cast my way, I need practice. On a straight section, I see Art – ahead of me with his team – step on the brake, kicking up a plume of snow. Must be a steep drop or tight curve coming up. I stomp on the drag and, when the trail falls away, drop into a half-crouch while shifting more heavily onto one runner and leaning off the handlebar. The sled is light and responsive. Even so I narrowly evade clipping a snow-draped tree with my brushbow. I make a mental note to focus on picking wider lines into the turns. As I pass Art, he has his sled down on its side and has dropped a snow hook to secure his team while he sorts out a tangled line.

Our mushers are now separated by speed

of travel. Those building a solid relationship with their dogs, or who have more dog-power hitched to their lines, speed behind Travis where he breaks trail with a snowmobile. The still-tentative have Cynthia riding sweep, ready to jump off her Ski-doo and lend a hand. With our sleds empty of all gear except a thermos and some dried fruit, we roam free like cowboys, agile if not speedy. It's a unique kind of exhilaration. And it's easy to understand why racers get addicted – arranging their lives around the sport and competing at great personal expense.

At the other end of the spectrum of speed and self-reliance, the Quest racers – both human and canine – are doubtlessly losing weight. I can't even imagine the toll the physical effort must be taking as, heading into Day 9 of the race, they tackle Eagle Summit. The 1,100-metre peak is infamous for wind-scoured conditions and a particularly steep climb followed by an even steeper drop, a place more than any other – on a course filled with open water, overflows (water running over river ice), glare ice and side hills – where mushers and dogs are in danger. As a CBC correspondent quoted one

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# Yukon

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race official as saying, "It's where dreams are lost and promises to God made."

Last year, Turner's son Saul was one of five racers trapped on Eagle Summit, pinned down by an Arctic storm. "It went from dog-sled race to *Apocalypse Now*, just like that," he had told us, back at the ranch. Meanwhile, the older Turner, waiting on the sidelines, could hear but not see two Hercules C130 aircraft and a Black Hawk helicopter thumping their way overhead through the blizzard. In 22 years of racing the Quest, he had never witnessed such an onslaught of weather and military hardware.

As if the trail wants to ensure that we won't get off too easily, either, Bettina awakens us later that night to a tent filled with thick, black smoke. Ejected from our shelter by a clogged stovepipe, we briefly join the guides who are already out sleeping in -52°C conditions. The next morning a tree doesn't move out of the way fast enough and one of the mushers ends her trip with a smashed sled. But when we finally limp back into Braeburn, Turner is there to greet us.

Most of the Quest racers, he confirms, have already crossed the finish line. Mackey won the race a few days earlier by a wide margin, in 10 days, two hours, 37 minutes, beating Turner's old record by almost 14 hours. ("Records are made to be broken," Turner says, "and I'm glad it was Lance.") Gatt has again come in second. Kleedehn has placed in the top five once more, edged out of third place by a mere three minutes. Michelle Phillips missed a top five placing by just over half an hour, and six racers have scratched. But there are a few others still out racing. (The "red lantern," or last finishing racer, won't cross the finish line for another two days, spending almost 15 days out on the course.)

Settling in for a burger and a beer – and a behemoth cinnamon bun – at the Braeburn Lodge, we drink a toast to the official racers before congratulating ourselves on our own modest success. We've ventured forth in the unforgiving cold: man, woman and dog. All have returned with no loss of life or limb. And though we've mushed less than a tenth of the distance the Quest racers ultimately cover, I contend we've had twice the fun, in half the time. ☐

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